

Chicago land Clergy Demand of Mayor Emmanuel to Call for Moratorium on School Closing

The proposed closing of fifty-four local elementary schools and consolidating scores of others that serve Chicago's poorest children in the poorest neighborhoods in the midst of a violence epidemic is the wrong action at the wrong time. The list is smaller than previously reported, but it still reflects too much harmful commotion in targeted areas. These actions would further destabilize unstable neighborhoods and puts at greater risk "at risk" children. It is not entirely clear what the real motives of the powers that be are, but this "playing God" by uprooting and mass shifting poor children and disrupting their fragile communities is just plain wrong.

One, we know that 90% of the disruption will be in the poorest black communities of Chicago. That should bring reflective pause in and of itself. This massive planned chaos, the closing and consolidation of over one hundred public schools at once, has not been done anywhere else in the nation. A cause for more pause. If we were looking for the contemporary version of separate and unequal public education policy, we have found it in Chicago.

Two, we also now know that the formula to determine neighborhood public schools' "empty seats" is faulty. It was based upon thirty elementary school students assigned to a classroom. That student teacher ratio is much too large for the attentive needs of poor children. Small classes matter, and they matter most for children with the greatest needs. Meanwhile, we are launching charter schools in the very areas with "empty seats". Yet, only one-fifth of the charters outperform their neighborhood school. These grand experiments with faulty formulas and free enterprise educators for poor children should give further cause for pause.

Three, the last thing struggling communities with devalued housing stock, fragile economies, and disinvestment need are shuttered public school buildings. It's the death knell for a community like West Garfield Park. Our church has built affordable single family housing. What is the value of our investments going look like with massive disinvestment of public dollars. It looks like our government has red-lined us without our informed consent. The people of our communities yet long to be a part of the thriving Chicago. With tax incremental finance dollars funding projects everywhere but the communities in the most need, it feels like some people somewhere are seeking to shut the poorest families out of the future of Chicago.

The school closing plans will not save dollars the first year, but closures will pretty much insure that many low income communities will head below rock bottom. The economic impact is further cause for pause.

Four, no one has shown in closure plans that poor children, already struggling, are going to far better educationally. No one in their right mind would defend the status quo. A "failing school" is a oxymoron. If a real case could be made that we could save a generation of children with school closures, that fact alone would trump everything else we mentioned as cause for pause. But, sadly, we could predict that in the chaos of mass closures the poorest children will fair even worst. With longer distances to travel through unsafe neighborhoods with experimental school consolidations, poor youngsters from fragile families will be caught in dangerous crossfire's and often found missing in action. We will probably save some money in the long run, but we could lose countless children and whole communities in this massive public education exodus. No thoughtful, empowered parent would voluntarily risk their child's future on the shaky 2013-14 propositions proposed by Chicago's public schools for the poorest communities. That's what makes it wrong. Pausing at least another year until educational and safety plans are clear is the right thing to do.

What's most disappointing is to see that Mayor Emmanuel was out of town on a skiing vacation trip when the closing numbers became public and the stuff hit the fan. We know the Mayor's a stand up guy. One of his endearing qualities is his ability to make tough decisions and take heat. We hope the way this has played out does not reflect a lack of focus on public education for the poorest children. His children and many of ours have excellent educational options. We do necessarily not rely on the public system to offer our children quality options. We, and most importantly our children, are certainly blessed. But our moral values, and often our personal experiences, makes us care about every child just about as much as we do our own. And so our values and concerns gives us reason to pause. Let's not do all of this now. It's too much and too uncertain.

There are not enough safeguards and upsides for the most vulnerable. We simply cannot cause this much disruption and risk in struggling communities with the poorest children in while Chicago is the national epicenter of urban violence. Classically, this is a case of large elephants fighting each other, but it is the ants that are trampled. Adults are in conflict and children are suffering. Politicians, school administrators, charter operators, and teachers and their unions will have to be challenged by all the rest of us to put children and their families first. Thinking of children and not other agendas will give us cause for pause. Let's go slower with more thoughtful concern and

the current leaders of all sides can come together and come back next year with a short and long term plan that truly helps improve the life options of our most vulnerable children.

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